MICHAEL CHIAGO

Vegetable Harvest
gouache on illustration board
Commissioned with funding from the Tucson/Pima Arts Council
ACNO 2003.2.9

From the TOHONO CHUL exhibitions
Seasons of the Saguaro: Michael Chiago
The Franco Family: Tohono O'odham Carvers

In this piece, two women and a boy carry beautiful baskets full of corn, squash, melons and devil’s claw, the bounty of cultivated foods that came as a result of summer rains. Summer rain brings the harvest season for the tepary beans, squash and corn. Traditional Tohono O'odham fields were located at the mouths of arroyos where floodwaters deposited fertile silt from the foothills and mountains. Crops were planted in soil made rich by previous seasons of flooding and were irrigated with water from the current season's rainfall. The Tohono O'odham honored the desert’s rhythms and the desert rewarded their wisdom and hard work with successful harvests. Tohono O'odham farmers grew devil’s claw for making baskets, including those used in the saguaro wine ceremony to summon rain back to the desert year after year.

Michael Chiago was born on the Tohono O'odham reservation west of Tucson. Set against a backdrop of mountains and desert, his artworks depict the traditional gatherings that bring his people together in friendship and prayer. Chiago illustrated the children's book, Sing Down the Rain, which tells the story of the saguaro wine ceremony. These paintings are part of a series commissioned by Tohono Chul for our Saguaro Discovery Trail that explores the importance of the saguaro for the Tohono O'odham people.
MICHAEL CHIAGO

Wine Ceremony
gouache on illustration board
Commissioned with funding from the Tucson/Pima Arts Council
ACNO 2003.2.7

From the TOHONO CHUL exhibitions
Seasons of the Saguaro: Michael Chiago
The Franco Family: Tohono O'odham Carvers

I’itoi, the creator of the Tohono O’odham, taught the Desert People their sacred wine ceremony so they could summon the rain. He taught them to make saguaro wine and gather to drink the wine and sing important songs to sing down the rain. For two nights, villagers dance in a circle outside of the Rain House where the saguaro wine ferments. The chief singers sing and make music with gourd rattles. The medicine man, in the center, holds eagle feathers to catch the wind to blow the clouds in, bringing rain. Once the wine is ready, people sit in a circle and sing stories about how the wine makes the rains come and pass the wine baskets around, drinking until it is gone.

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UNKNOWN HOPI ARTIST

QAA’O Katsina, Corn Katsina
painted and carved cottonwood with feathers and shell
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Robert Wilson
ACNO 86.2.18

From the Tohono Chul exhibitions
From Native Hands: The Collection of Tohono Chul Park
Corn is Life
Tohono Chul Park's Permanent Collection of Native American Crafts, 1997
Quilting From the Hopi Mesas
Where Nature, Art and Culture Connect
Quilting on the Hopi Mesas

QAA’O is the younger brother of the Hemis Kachina and appears in Powamuya and regular dances. He performs in the Kiva Plaza and mixed dances, representing prayer for the fruition and growth of corn.

The importance of corn as a life-sustaining staple dates back thousands of years. Anthropologists who have carbon-dated finds at the Tehuacan Valley in Mexico to 5000 B.C., and at Bat Cave in New Mexico to 2000 B.C. have discovered cultivated corn. The great civilizations of the Mayas, Incas and Aztecs had corn deities who they believed bestowed abundant food or withheld a bountiful harvest. According to legend, a Mayan hero named Gucumatz embarked on a journey into unknown and perilous lands to bring an edible plant, corn, to his people. To the Incas, corn was under the patronage of Manco Cápac, god of fertility. The Aztecs associated corn with their god Quetzalcoatl and goddess Zilonen, and they performed elaborate ceremonies and even made human sacrifices to please their corn deities.

In 1492, when Columbus reached the New World, he was introduced to maize, corn. Within a few years, corn had been transported to Europe. The Portuguese later took corn seeds with them when voyaging to Africa, the East Indies, and Asia. By the late 16th century, corn was being cultivated in many areas of the world.

It took centuries for corn to be carried north from Mexico to the American Southwest by migrating Indians. From time immemorial to today, indigenous people have revered corn as a life-sustaining gift. Corn gods, corn maidens, corn mothers, seed-planting ceremonies, harvest rituals, stories, songs and chants are representative of ways for honoring this, the most sacred of plants among Native Americans.

For the Hopi who live on mesas in Northern Arizona, corn is a common theme in katsina songs and is used in many rituals. According to their oral tradition, when the Hopi people emerged from the underworld, they were offered a variety of corn. The Hopi selected a small ear of blue corn, thus determining their destiny. Corn is the traditional measure of Hopi wealth and its ceremonial use is very important.
UNKNOWN HOPI ARTIST

Rugan Katsina, Rasp Katsina
carved and painted cottonwood with feathers and fur
Gift of the Estate of Agnes T. and Don L. Smith
ACNO 98.1.82

From the Tohono Chul exhibitions
New Acquisitions from the Agnes T. and Donald L. Smith Collection
Where Nature, Art and Culture Connect
Quilting on the Hopi Mesas

Markings on each side of this Katsina's face represent corn, a plant that is very important to the Hopi people. The Rugan Katsina comes in groups, accompanied by corn maidens who play on rasp instruments.

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Navajo weavings were traditionally made to keep people warm, to protect and cover, and in some cases, to help transport items. They are a very versatile and useful craft and the Navajo have long been masters at creating quality weavings. Early blankets were so densely woven that they were waterproof. This became invaluable to many people in contact with the Navajo, and they could sell their blankets for a small fortune. Before tourists became interested in their use as durable rugs, the patterns were simple and all dyes came from plants and minerals. Since the late 1800's though, textile weaving has become a highly successful tourist industry. Aniline or commercial dyes were first synthesized in the 1850's. The natural dyes drawn from plants, animals and minerals produced colors that could be very vivid, and therefore the identification of aniline dyes on a rug is reduced to an educated guess.

The vivid colors of this sandpainting rug suggest the use of aniline dyes. This rug pattern is inspired by the stylized figures of the Yeii. These are the Holy People represented in Navajo sandpaintings. The compositions that medicine men create on the ground with colored sand during curing ceremonies are destroyed the same day. In the beginning, many felt that the representation of these figures in a permanent state was dangerous and even sacrilegious, but a few artists began to weave them in the 1800's and continues today.

Yeii rugs are very popular due to their symbolic content. There is no religious content to this piece, to maintain Navajo privacy, but they do carry a spiritual theme. Yeii rugs are known to be handspun, synthetically dyed, and usually coarse. The Yeii figures in this rug are long and thin, front facing figures that have healing powers. Male Yeii's hold a rattle in one hand and crooked lightning in the other, while a female holds a rattle and an evergreen bough. There are two Yeii in the middle of the rug and surrounding them on three sides is the Rainbow Yeii, which is open on the side meant to face east. Between and around the Yeii's are stalks of sacred plants, corn and tobacco. Because of the corn images, this rug may represent the Blessing the Way, a pattern based on a ceremony for blessing others with a long and good life. The solid border and background are typical of rugs woven in Northern Arizona. Corn was a food staple for daily life. It was an important part of Native American diet. It is known as one of the most versatile foods and can be grown in almost every state in America.
UNKNOWN HUICHOL ARTIST

Yarn Painting
wood, beeswax and yarn
Gift of Julie Harding
ACNO 87.4.1

From the Tohono Chul exhibition
Tohono Chul Park’s Permanent Collection, 1994

Yarn paintings are not sacred but may represent sacred objects, stories or experiences. They are used to teach children about the Huichol culture, as decoration and as an expression of a personal experience. The Huichol are known for their colorful artwork and is said to be where yarn painting originated. The most used symbol is also their most profitable agricultural crop, corn. This Yarn Painting depicts a man with fiddle beside an enclosed space representing the sun with seed sprouting under the earth and shoots springing from the earth. Corn, blooming plants, animals, birds complete the piece representing grown and prosperity.
UNKNOWN TOHONO O'ODHAM ARTIST

Man-in-the-Maze Plaque
beargrass with devil's claw and yucca
Gift of the Estate of Agnes T. and Don L. Smith
ACNO 98.1.1

A flat basket like this one is called a plaque. Since the Tohono O'odham had no use for them, they made them solely for sale. They were made for wall decoration or could be used as a hot plate. The Man-in-the-Maze is a cultural symbol of the Tohono O'odham whose story has many variations. The man at the top of the plaque represents birth and as he goes through the maze, he gets older and his life changes until he reaches the dark center representing death.

While many basket makers use commercial dyes to save time, some still use organic and natural materials for the colorful elements of their baskets. Some of the most commonly used plants in the Southwest include:

White - willow, yucca and sumac
Black - devil's claw
Green and Yellow - yucca
Red - Spanish bayonet root are.

A variety of other plant materials can be utilized to produce dyes includes:

Black - sunflowers seeds and sumac bark
Light rust - lichens and mountain mahogany root bark
Yellow - barberry roots